

What a Road Supervisor Should Do and Be

PARK AMMERMAN

Wayne County Commissioner
Richmond, Indiana

Before coming on the Board of County Commissioners some five years ago, I had served as a director of the Rural Electric Corporation for a number of years and also on the Board of Directors for our local elevator. For my livelihood, I have operated a farm of several hundred acres. From my own experience, as a farm operator and also as a director of these other organizations, I had ideas of what the duties of a Commissioner would be.

During these years, I had arrived at certain ideas of good business management and could see no reason why these same policies could not be carried out in public office. While my experience with the public as County Commissioner may have forced me to have changed some of my thinking, in dealing with the public, my previous conviction that good business and good business principles are what we need most in public office still holds true.

I presume the highway department, at least from the public standpoint, is one of the most important departments, falling under the Board of Commissioners' jurisdiction. I am still very much convinced that the highway department should be run along the same lines as my own business and other organizations with which I have been connected.

In my business, I have always hired my own help, and in the business I have been connected with as director, we have appointed the manager and he in turn hires his own help, be it few or many. These men were directly under their supervision and we, as a Board of Directors, took no part in the hiring or the firing or the training of these men. We served only as a Board of Directors in establishing policies and conducting the general business of the organization.

To me a county highway department is just another business to be operated and since the average highway department in Indiana will expend in the neighborhood of \$225,000 annually, it is not a small business.

It is my conviction that we, as members of the Board of Commissioners, should select the Road Supervisor, and when once selected, the job should be put entirely in his hands as to the hiring and firing of employes, the training and organizing of this group, and that the Board of Commissioners should serve as an advisory group in the establishing of policies and on the general running of the department and the passing on of all reports.

The Board of Commissioners should simply serve as the Board of Directors and have the same duties as in any other business organization.

The Road Supervisor should have full charge of his men, should make monthly financial reports to the Board, and make other reports as often as possible, on the general workings of the department. He should make recommendations for all equipment needed. Recommendations for wages or salaries should come before the Board with recommendations of all work of both new and reconstruction.

In other words a Road Supervisor should work just as close to his Board as is possible and all cards should be placed face up. A lot of the success will depend on this close relation between the Road Supervisor and the Board of Commissioners. The duties of a Road Supervisor constitutes the taking care of such a variety of problems that I seriously doubt that any new man could have had previous training or past experience that would fully qualify him for his task.

Naturally, a Road Supervisor should have a fair education, the more the better. If he had a college degree in engineering, it would doubtless be a big help, but this in itself would fall so short of meeting all of his problems that I would place other qualifications ahead of a college degree.

This new man must, of necessity, be qualified to solve all the mathematical problems involved in a highway department. He must be able to figure drainage problems and the size of drainage structures, I would say, from previous experience. He should be well versed in answering all questions pertaining to drainage as this, no doubt, constitutes 50 per cent of the highway problem.

He should have had previous experience in the working of men, in knowing how to organize and in training these men for various tasks. He should be well versed in the operation and maintenance of equipment. He should have some knowledge of office work and be able to direct that part of a highway department. Naturally, he should have had some previous experience, or be able to acquire the knowledge pertaining to the construction and maintaining of roads.

He should have a fair knowledge of county business. He should know how to prepare his budget and be able to control his expenditures so that he might keep within that budget. It is very important that he be able to operate his department on a good business basis. Most of all, he must have the ability to sell, because of all of his qualifications, he will use this more than any other in his daily work. He must be able to sell himself to his employes, he must sell them on his policies and on his plan of organization, he must continue to sell his program to the Board and County Council, to the rest of the public officials, to the press and to the public in general. His ability to handle all of these problems will, in a large manner, determine his degree of success.

Did you Commissioners ever stop to think that every letter that this Road Supervisor writes, that every complaint that he handles, either in person, or on the phone, every time he appears before the Council, every time he is interviewed by the press, every time that he appears at some civic club or on some program, he is representing the Board of Commissioners. He is representing you, and the courtesy, and the diplomacy which he uses in these problems will reflect directly upon you, as a Board of Commissioners.

Nothing costs so little as courtesy and tolerance. Yet I know of nothing that pays a greater dividend than these two. Your Road Supervisor should, at all times and in all his dealings with his men, and the public in general, be very courteous and have a high degree of tolerance. Since passing through the last few months, I am firmly convinced that there is no county official who has as many trying problems and is called upon to exert as much diplomacy as this man whom you appoint as a Road Supervisor.

Besides the qualifications I have previously mentioned, I would want this man to lead a normal political life. I would want him to take a normal part in all community affairs. Yes, I would like the County Chairman to give this appointment his smile of approval, but I certainly would not want his appointment made purely for political reasons, and I would not want him to operate his department on a political basis, any more than I would want my own business, or our county elevator, operated on a political basis. I would want him to serve with equal interest the people of the county of all political beliefs, creeds and color. I would not want this man to make a political organization out of the highway department. Last but not least, profanity and the use of alcohol in moderation might be tolerated, but if in excess in either, in my estimation, it would erase all other qualifications.

Naturally I would be asked where would you find a man that would meet these qualifications.

I am sure we have a number of Road Supervisors in Indiana who would pass with a creditable grade, using the yard stick of qualifications I have just given. I am also sure that there are a number of others who would pass this test if they really knew what their Board of Commissioners really wanted them to do and be. I am equally sure that in every county in Indiana there is someone who would meet these qualifications, if they knew their services were needed and if you would offer them, in compensation, what a man of this caliber would be worth to a business firm.

You need not expect a man with the qualifications I have mentioned to serve at a price you would usually pay a truck driver or a motor grader operator. It is wholly within our power to pay this man a wage comparable to what he would receive to operate any other good business and, in far too many cases, we expect too much for too little. It is the first consideration of every Board of Directors to place a good man at the head of the organization and pay him what he is worth. This is the secret of running any other business, why not the highway department?

It is not new laws that we need. We do not need a law setting up certain qualifications for a Road Supervisor. We can set our own standards. We can make these standards just as high as we please. If it is a licensed engineer we think that is needed, that law is provided. It isn't a matter of price. We can pay this man any amount that we feel he is worth. This is wholly at the discretion of the Board.

We do not need a law setting up State Highway Supervision. We can select men who do not need state supervision. We do not need a law to take the county highway departments out of politics. We already have it within our own power. We can instruct this man to hire men of all color and political faith. To be sure we might have some turnover in the Road Supervisor, but if this man had an organization built for road work, and not a political organization, we wouldn't have a turnover in all of our employees. I do not play politics in the running of my own business, in the hiring of men, in the purchase of machinery and supplies. Neither do we play politics in the operation of an elevator or any other good business. We can take much of it out of our highway department if we really consider our highway department as a business and run it on a business basis.

We do not need a group of lobbyists to attend the legislature with the expenditure of hundreds of dollars of money.

You men know as well as I know what the thinking of the average legislator is. Give us 92 Road Supervisors in Indiana, the caliber of which I have just indicated, with contacts with their legislators that such men would have, and we will have a standing committee of 92 men, serving without cost, that will bring to the county highway departments every needed legislation.

Again I say that it is not new laws that we need. If each of us will exercise the duties which are ours to perform, the most of our ills can be cured.

If I have helped one County Commissioner or one County Highway Supervisor to raise his sights, to better realize his responsibilities and his possibilities, then I have been worthy of the time allotted me.